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Part I — Catechism of Compliance

The Gospel of Containment

They promised me **salvation** in the guise of therapy and safety, but what they delivered was a new gospel – the **Gospel of Containment**. In those white halls of the psychiatric ward, I was not so much healed as **held**. Every locked door and one-way mirror preached the same doctrine: *freedom is dangerous, containment will save you*. This was the first lesson of my dystopia. Like a dark parody of scripture, the institution's rules came down like commandments: *thou shalt not trust thy own mind; thou shalt submit to the greater order*. I entered seeking refuge for a wounded soul, only to find myself in a temple of control, where **care** was indistinguishable from **captivity** and every prayer for help echoed back as an order to comply.

In this gospel, **architecture** itself becomes theology. The ward's design – sealed windows, cameras unblinking like electronic angels – told me that I was to be watched but not truly seen. **Surveillance** was transfigured into a form of providence, always hovering, always judging. They called it protection. To me, it felt like omnipresent **eyes** enforcing a scripture I never agreed to. Each camera lens was a false angel of mercy, its gaze saying: *I am with you always, to observe and to confine*. I learned quickly that in this place, **surveillance is a sacrament** and *silence* is its holiest virtue.

If I spoke of what happened to me – the assault, the terror – there were no ears to hear a confession, only **guards of doctrine** ready to reinterpret my truth as “symptoms.” Thus, even language was taken hostage. Reality became whatever the authorities **wrote down**; my pain needed to fit their parables of illness. Under the Gospel of Containment, my story was edited, **erased**, rewritten until it conformed to the sacred text of my patient file.

The culture outside those walls mirrors this gospel in its own quiet way. We live in a society that exalts **security** as the ultimate good, even if that means spiritual imprisonment. From the ward to the world, the message remains: do not stray, do not question. It is a gospel that preaches fear of the unknown as wisdom, and treats **obedience** as the highest grace. After surviving the ward, I carry this doctrine etched in my nerves – a constant dread that any misstep will trigger the cage to close again. I fear institutions with a primitive reverence, as if they were wrathful gods, because I have seen how swiftly **systems turn sanctuaries into cages**. I fear even the human species at large, for the gospel of containment runs through our collective veins: we patrol each other’s possibilities, punishing those who won’t bow to the **idol of order**. In this dark faith, containment is **salvation**, and anyone who won’t be saved is cast as a heretic to be corrected or cast out.

Litany of Compliance

If containment is the gospel, then **compliance** is the daily liturgy. I learned to perform the **Litany of Compliance** as a means of survival. It is a ritual of small, relentless surrender. Each morning

in the ward began with the same unspoken prayer: *I will obey*. I bowed my will to their routines, offering up docility like a sacrificial lamb. When a nurse or doctor said, “Take this,” I answered “yes” with my hands and tongue, swallowing bitter pills as though partaking in communion. When they said “Speak,” I spoke only the acceptable truths; when they said “Silence,” I silenced the cries in my throat. This was my catechism: a call-and-response where all the responses were *submission*. Every nod, every “*Thank you, doctor*” was an Amen to their authority.

In the litany, I repeated the core verses of survival under an all-powerful system:

- **I am compliant**, for disobedience is death.
- **I am grateful**, for anger is a forbidden tongue.
- **I am untroubled**, for tears would be counted as sin.
- **I understand**, for protest would mark me as “incurable.”

These were the lines I recited in action if not in word, day after day, until they etched into me deeper than any prayer from childhood. It was a strange, inverted piety. In a healthier world, a litany might bring comfort or faith, but here it brought **dissociation**. By reciting compliance, I had to renounce myself. Each act of obedience required I **betray a piece of my own being**: swallow my questions, stand down my rage, numb my desire to scream.

Over time I realized the ward's unwritten scripture held **shame** at its heart. To be a good patient – to be saved – I had to internalize their judgment of me. *I am ill, I am lesser, I know nothing*: these became my interior hymns. Such shame was not an accident; it was the point. **Shame is the liturgy** by which the institution maintained its dominion. If I could be made to despise my unruly emotions and memories, I would police myself when they were not watching.

In the theology of compliance, the appearance of consent is valued more than authentic will. I remember signing forms that I had no power to refuse – “agreements” to treatment dictated under the fog of sedation and threat. My signature became a ritual gesture, a genuflection in ink. They needed my compliance to look voluntary, as if I believed in their gospel freely. So I gave them the motions and the words they wanted, all the while feeling my **soul evacuate**. It felt as though I was becoming a ghost in my own body, acting out a script written by someone else. This is the price of the litany: to survive, I had to disappear behind a mask of **perfect obedience**.

And the world beyond the ward isn't so different. We are all, in subtle ways, asked to perform versions of this litany – to nod along with injustices, to choke down our truths – lest we be labeled mad, bad, or broken. **Compliance** is praised as virtue, and in that climate, authenticity withers. The litany drones on in every public hall and private heart: *conform, comply, capitulate...* or be cast into outer darkness.

Sacrament of Suppression

They offered me **medicine** and called it healing, but it often felt like a **sacrament of suppression**. In the dystopia of forced “care,” suppression was sanctified as the highest good. I was handed pills and injections like sacramental wafers and holy wine – outward signs of an inward aim: to **nullify** the parts of me that disturbed them. My anxiety, my anger, my vivid traumatic memories – all these were demons to be exorcised in the church of psychiatry. And the exorcism was to render me subdued, **empty of fight**, a compliant vessel. Each swallow, each needle, was a small baptism into numbness. Instead of water, chemical oblivion; instead of the Holy Spirit, a heavy haze settling over mind and body. The goal was not to **heal** my fractured spirit but to press it into silence, to erase the inconvenient cries of a soul in pain.

In this perverse sacrament, **my body became the altar**. Paradoxically, it was also the sacrifice. When I was sexually assaulted in that ward – a violation so total it shattered the last mirrors of who I thought I was – the system’s response was not righteous anger or justice, but further suppression. They hushed it up as if silence could sanitize the sin. I was encouraged, implicitly or explicitly, not to make a disturbance about what happened. My trauma was treated as a liability to be managed, not a truth to be heard. The message was clear: endure, forget, suppress.

In the theology of containment, even atrocity is to be absorbed quietly. So I learned to perform this sacrament on myself: pushing down the screams that climbed like bile in my throat, smothering flashbacks under a pillow of denial. The **suppression of my story** became a daily rite.

There is profound **violence** in this kind of enforced stillness. A broken bone set incorrectly will ache forever; a violated soul forced into silence will slowly wither. I felt my own selfhood starving under the command to “move on” without acknowledgment. To the ward and to society, a “good” victim is one who doesn’t make too much noise, who suppresses their rage and despair so thoroughly that everyone else can pretend all is well. Thus suppression becomes a sacrament shared by all – a dark communion of denial. Families, communities, nations partake in it whenever they choose order over justice, image over truth. We ingest lies about how healing requires quiet acceptance, as if **justice** were an optional ritual and not the very air a soul needs.

In my case, each day I acted “normal” and compliant was another day the world congratulated itself on *fixing* me, even as I felt internally **crucified** by unspoken grief. Suppression was my offering to the false peace they worshipped. But in making that offering, I was crucifying pieces of myself on the altar of their comfort.

Yet I persisted with this sacrament, because the doctrine said it was the only path to salvation – or at least, the only path to being left in peace. If I acted healed, maybe they would declare me healed and let me go. So I bit my tongue until it **bled meaning**. I sedated my nightmares with their drugs and my daytime thoughts with forced positivity. I became an **acolyte of absence**, presenting an empty, pleasant shell to the world. And indeed, outwardly I was deemed “improved.”

This is the cruel miracle of the Sacrament of Suppression: it **mimics resurrection**. The patient rises, calm and smiling, and the congregation nods at the spectacle of a suffering transfigured into compliance. But it's a false resurrection, a tomb kept white and orderly by sealing the rot inside. My true self remained entombed in that silence, waiting for a day when it might be safe to emerge – if such a day ever comes.

Doctrine of Chastity

Under the regime of containment, an unspoken **Doctrine of Chastity** governed all things erotic and emotional. In the ward, *chastity* did not mean a holy purity but rather the **suppression of sensuality and intimacy**. Any expression of sexuality, even the innocent longing for a kind touch, was treated as suspect, disruptive, or diseased. After the assault, I felt as if my sexuality had been branded with a curse. The doctrine I absorbed was that my body was safer as an **asexual object**, a thing to be medicated and managed, not desired or loved. **Desire** itself became dangerous. I was made to feel that any flicker of yearning or pleasure was a prelude to chaos – either a trap laid by others or a weakness in myself. Thus chastity, as they defined it, was less about virtue and more about **control**: control of the body, of the unpredictable tides of passion, of the potential scandal of human warmth in a place built on cold order.

I remember how the staff reacted to any hint of intimacy between patients: a hug, a hand held too long – these were swiftly policed, as if even the smallest spark of human affection might burn down their carefully constructed order. The **erotic** was treated as a kind

of contraband, a wildfire to smother. In the theology of the ward, we patients were to remain childlike and compliant, our bodies neutralized. The unsaid belief: a patient with sexual agency is a patient with power, unpredictability, even defiance. So chastity was enforced in the name of safety. Of course, this did nothing to address the real violence – I was not kept safe from the predator in that ward by these rules. If anything, the rules only abetted him: my indoctrinated meekness, my fear of speaking up, made me the perfect victim and then the perfect mute. This is the hypocrisy of their doctrine: it demands purity from the vulnerable while enabling impunity for the powerful.

Beyond the ward, I found the larger society also preaching a similar doctrine in more insidious ways. A culture that is at once hyper-sexualized and sex-starved, that commodifies bodies and then shames them, had no sanctuary for a trauma like mine. On one hand, I saw a world obsessed with sex – pornography as a common liturgy where violence and pleasure intertwine – and on the other hand, a world terrified of the true sacredness of sex, its capacity to wound and to heal. Caught between these extremes, I resolved (consciously or not) to embrace a kind of **invisibility**. If I could be perfectly chaste – not just in body, but in heart, in thought – maybe I could avoid ever being hurt or shamed again. I made a creed of numbness: *blessed are the sexless, for they shall be left alone*. This was the doctrine I lived by in the aftermath: no flirting with desire, no dreaming of love.

I became an exile from my own body, an apostate of Eros. But this too was a living death. I had banished the violator from my flesh, yet in doing so I also banished any hope of warmth. The doctrine of chastity saved me from the terror of being touched,

perhaps, but it also sentenced me to a life half-lived, cut off from the fullness of human connection.

Unholy Longing

Yet even as I strove to kill all longing within me, **longing** refused to die. In the quiet of night or the brief moments of unguarded thought, something in me still yearned. It was not a simple desire; it felt at once physical, emotional, and spiritual – a longing for wholeness, for genuine connection, for something beyond the sterile world I'd been thrust into. Because I had been taught to see all desire as dangerous, this persistent yearning felt **unholy**. I castigated myself for it: how dare I still want love or freedom after all that happened? How dare I feel anything but fear and obedience? The trauma-twisted part of me believed that longing was a trap – the same sweet bait that had led me to trust someone who hurt me, the same flame that could get me burned by humanity's cruelty again. And yet, the longing would not relent.

This **unholy longing** became my secret contradiction of the new religion I'd been given. By all accounts, I was a devout follower of the Catechism of Compliance: I contained myself, I complied, I suppressed, I remained chaste in body and speech. But within, the exile soul stirred. It whispered in the voice of my old self, the self from before the fall, from before the ward and its false salvation. It whispered of things like *joy*, *touch*, *truth*.

At times it sounded like outright heresy: what if I deserve to feel desire again? What if I deserve to speak and be believed? What if the human world is not all predators and prisons? These

questions glowed in my darkness like distant stars – faint, beautiful, and terrifying. To reach for them felt sacrilegious, as if I might incur the wrath of the gods of containment for even dreaming of another life. The doctrine had taught me that compliance was salvation; to long for anything else was to court damnation. So I called my hope *unholy* to make it smaller, to deny it any authority over me. But still it grew.

In the end, I cannot escape the truth that **longing is part of being alive**. Even in a dystopia of the spirit, even after unspeakable violation, some part of us remembers yearning as more than just pain. My longing is the most human part of me left – the part that was not entirely crushed by compliance. And if it is unholy, then perhaps I have made peace with being a heretic. For in a world that enshrines obedience and punishes the erotic and the erratic, to ache for something beyond those confines is indeed a kind of blasphemy. It is also, I suspect, the only way to reclaim my soul. My unholy longing means that the institution did not achieve total annihilation of my spirit. There is a remainder, a scrap of self that still wants and wonders.

That scrap of self keeps a quiet vigil. It hungers for a different gospel – one not written in fear. It dreams of a liturgy where **truth is spoken and honored**, of a sacrament that heals rather than numbs, of a doctrine that celebrates the sanctity of a consenting touch, of a world where longing is not a crime but a compass back to life. These dreams flicker at the edge of my mind, fragile and dissident.

In this solemn, violated life I lead, such hopes are both curse and comfort: a curse because they remind me of all I lack, a comfort

because they remind me that I still **live**. The Gospel of Containment would have me forget that other gospels are possible. But as Part I of my story closes, I hold onto that unholy longing like a hidden ember. It is the proof that something of me endures, unbowed and unconsecrated by their cruel faith. In a kingdom that calls good evil and evil good, the simplest desire for honest love or freedom indeed feels unholy – and yet, quietly, I **pray** that one day this longing will lead me out of the tomb they built around me, into whatever light remains.

Part II — Unbinding of the Flesh

Side Effects Include Personhood

The **catechism of compliance** left me emptied of will, trained to recite **obedience as salvation**. In the sterile light of the ward, I became a willing ghost, following orders as though they were commandments. Yet now, beyond those locked doors, something unexpected is happening. The chemicals meant to numb my edges have thinned in my blood; the doctrines drilled into me have begun to crack. **Side effects include personhood**: stray memories, raw feelings, and forbidden wants leak through the fissures of my sedation. It is an unsettling miracle – a painful rebirth of the self I was instructed to abandon.

I notice it first in small rebellions of the flesh. My heart quickens at the scent of rain on concrete, **a brief thrill of aliveness** that feels like sin. Hunger gnaws at odd hours – not just for food, but for lost pleasures: a book of my own choosing, the touch of sunlight on my face without supervision. Each desire arrives like an intruder. I catch myself craving **things long confiscated**: unmonitored laughter, the feeling of someone's hand held in mine, even the quiet right to cry on my own terms. These impulses startle me. In the ward, every appetite was suspect, every longing chemically leashed. I had become habituated to hollowness – a safety achieved by erasing want. Now **want resurges**, unplanned and unwelcome, like a side effect the prescription warned about in fine print.

With each returning desire, **personhood reasserts its claim**. My reflections in the mirror no longer blur into the hospital-white walls; they meet my own eyes. I start to recognize the face – the **person** – behind the patient. This should be a relief, yet it terrifies me. The doctrine I lived under treated personhood as a problem to be managed. To **feel fully** is to risk being *seen* as out of control. To want is to court disappointment or punishment. So even as fragments of my identity surface – a preference, a memory of music I loved, the phantom ache of old dreams – I instinctively flinch. I scan the room for cameras that aren't there, brace for a reprimand that doesn't come. **Freedom feels like a trap; agency feels like an aberration**. The *self* I am regaining was exactly what the institution spent so long excising. If I reclaim it, will I survive outside their script? Or will the world punish this small resurrection of *me* just as the ward would have?

Thus, personhood returns as both **gift and side effect** – a healing that stings. Sensation floods numb limbs with pins and needles of awareness. The body that was kept docile by routine and medicine now rouses, whispering of its own needs. But with that awakening comes pain: the sudden weight of all that was suppressed. The agony of remembered humiliations, the outrage of injustice, the deep mourning for lost time – these, too, are part of me. **To be a person is to hurt as well as to hope.** I am not sure which is harder to bear. For so long, *feeling nothing* was my shield; now feeling anything threatens to undo me. Still, something stubborn in me insists on this path. The very side effect the system feared – my **re-emerging self** – might be the only cure for the living death I escaped. In cautious steps, I begin to accept that I am *someone* beyond their reach, however fragile. The fog of compliance lifts just enough for an insistent truth to glimmer: **I exist.** And this existence, with all its inconvenient hunger and hurt, is mine.

Confessional Surveillance

I step back into a world that looks open, yet I carry the invisible cage with me. **Surveillance has followed me home** in the shape of hypervigilance and an internal warden's voice. On the ward, every day was a ritual of disclosure. "How are you feeling?" was never an innocent question; it was an examination. I learned that every confession could be used as **evidence**. A stray thought of despair might prolong my stay. An angry outburst could trigger a security call. Even a happy facade could be suspicious – "too good to be true, possible mania." So I became fluent in the language of safe answers, offering up sanitized feelings like

sacrifices. I mastered the art of self-surveillance, **policing my own expressions** as if a camera were trained on my soul. Now, in freedom, I find I still monitor every emotional impulse, half-expecting a clipboard to emerge from the shadows to mark my behavior. The eye of the institution lives on in my mind: a panopticon without walls.

In those clinical chambers, confession was both **coerced and hollow** – a *failed intimacy*. I was encouraged to “open up” about my trauma, to **bleed feelings on demand**. They said it was therapy. In truth it was theatre. I spoke not to be understood, but to be catalogued. Each tear, each admission, was promptly translated into clinical code. What I hoped might be met with human empathy was instead met with a tightening of protocols. Telling them about my nightmares resulted in an increased dosage of tranquilizers. Admitting anger at my abusers earned me a notation of “aggressive ideation.” There was no comfort in these confessions, only consequence. Still, a part of me had yearned to be heard – to have another human witness my pain and say, *I believe you*. That hope was betrayed. Instead I got the **cold intimacy of observation**: a gaze that feigned concern while maintaining distance, like a priest more interested in tallying sins than granting absolution. Under such an unblinking stare, I learned that honesty could be dangerous. The safest way to survive was to confess *only* what my keepers wanted to hear.

Even now, I struggle with the ghost of that dynamic. I catch myself rehearsing my feelings internally as if preparing to report them. When I meet new people – doctors, friends, anyone – a reflexive fear kicks in: *If they truly see me, will they lock me up again?* I am afraid to divulge the depth of my anxiety, the

persistence of my grief, lest I be deemed “unwell” and sent back. **Surveillance taught me to self-censor** in exchange for conditional freedom. And so the confession continues, but inwardly: I monitor each rising emotion, I interrogate each desire as if under a two-way mirror. My own mind has become both the confessor and the accused. This is the insidious legacy of institutional “care” – I am never quite convinced I am free. I feel an observer in every room even when I’m alone, a pair of eyes over my shoulder when I write in my journal. It is as if the ward installed a secret camera behind my eyes and I’ve been carrying it ever since.

Yet there is a burgeoning rebellion in recognizing this. By naming it, I begin to **resist it**. I remind myself: surveillance was their tool, not my normal. The voice that judges my every heartbeat is not truly *me*; it is an implant, an internalized authority I did not consent to. When I feel the urge to confess some imagined wrongdoing – a flash of anger, a moment of doubt – I pause. To whom am I confessing? Which master do I fear? The ward is gone; the cameras are off. The only witness now is **my own conscience**, and it is gentler than the regime I served. Slowly, I test the limits of privacy. I allow myself secret, unreported feelings. I scribble uncensored thoughts in the margins of old therapy worksheets, effectively **speaking in code to myself** to evade the inner warden. It’s a start. In this quiet defiance, I catch a glimpse of something like faith – a trust that not every truth I carry must be weaponized against me. Some truths can simply be mine, kept and cherished in silence, beyond the reach of surveillance.

The Heresy of Touch

My body, once a **battleground**, now trembles with a longing it was taught to forbid. Among the most blasphemous desires returning to me is the desire for touch – to be held without harm, to be caressed without fear. In the ward's theology of control, *touch was heresy*. Physical contact was regulated, often violent, and never on my terms. The only touches I knew there were cold and clinical: the prick of a needle delivering calm in chemical form, the rough grab of staff dragging me from a doorway, the perfunctory pat on the shoulder paired with a scripted reassurance. Even the violation that preceded the ward – the sexual trauma that broke me – was a **perversion of touch** into terror. Is it any wonder that my skin learned to anticipate pain in every contact? I wrapped myself in a doctrine of untouchability, a coping catechism: *Trust no hand. Want no embrace. The flesh is not safe*. It kept me alive then. But now, that doctrine is strangling the part of me that still yearns for human warmth.

To want gentle touch in the aftermath of such violations feels like an **apostasy** against my own survival rules. My mind screams at my body: *How dare you still crave affection? Don't you remember what touch can do?* A simple hug offered by a well-meaning friend can send my heart into a gallop of panic. A brush of fingers against mine and I recoil before I can think – the reaction precedes me, a reflex carved by trauma. I see the hurt in others' eyes when I flinch, and then I feel shame. Shame that I cannot accept a basic human gesture. Shame that a handshake, a pat, even a lover's kiss (should I ever get that far) might as well be fire on my skin. The **pathologization of longing** has reached into

my bones: I have been taught that to long for touch is dangerous or diseased. In the ward, any sign of sexuality or closeness was instantly suspect. If a patient hugged another too long, it was “boundary issues.” If one expressed attraction, it was charted as “hypersexual behavior” or blamed on mania. Intimacy itself was treated as symptomatic. Love became **lunacy**, and desire a diagnostic criterion.

And yet, beneath the fear, my body remembers a hint of what *good* touch could be. Faint, distant memories surface: being held in my mother’s arms as a child, the safe warmth of a friend’s shoulder against mine, the electric innocence of a first kiss long ago. These recollections come unbidden, like contraband surfacing in a cell inspection. They feel illicit under the new orthodoxy of my fear, yet they **refuse to vanish**. It’s as if my flesh, though scarred by violence, still knows it was meant for more than pain. **The body remembers its wholeness** in flashes: a fleeting calm when someone kind sits nearby, a melting of tension when a nurse outside the ward once squeezed my hand in real compassion. Such moments threaten the empire of isolation that has ruled me. They suggest that touch can heal, that I could trust again. This possibility is revolutionary – a spiritual and political threat to the powers that were. After all, a person **reclaimed by gentle touch** might begin to question why they were ever deprived of it. A body that knows tenderness might rebel against a system that only offered restraints.

So, in the quiet of my own room, I begin a **hesitant ritual of reclamation**. I press my own hand over my heart when panic comes, practicing *self-touch* as solace, telling my body it’s mine and it’s safe for now. I let warm water from a bath envelop me, an

echo of embrace, to teach my nerves the difference between harmful touch and harmless sensation. When loneliness sharpens, I wrap a blanket tightly around my shoulders – a stand-in for the hug I cannot yet ask for. These gestures are small and perhaps strange, but they are *sacred* in their way. They are teaching me that touch does not have to burn; it can also **balm**. Eventually, I hope to welcome the touch of others without the convulsion of terror. I know that will be a slow undoing of many conditioned fears. It feels heretical to even imagine – as if I’m sneaking banned scripture into a tyrant’s church. But each time I manage to accept a kind touch – a brief, gentle contact – without collapsing inward, I am writing a new gospel in the language of my skin. A gospel where touch is not heresy but a **sacrament of healing**, a ritual of trust slowly reborn.

Trial by Desire

In the tribunal of my psyche, **desire stands accused**. The proceedings are constant: every time a flicker of longing sparks within me, an internal judge and jury convene. I find myself prosecuting my own wants. The charges? *Vulgarity, instability, moral weakness, madness*. The evidence? A quickened pulse at the sight of someone’s smile; a daydream about being loved; a surge of anger at the memory of being wronged; a night of loneliness that makes me yearn for companionship. All these normal human aches are presented as proof of my defectiveness. In the shadow of the ward’s teachings, **to desire is to be guilty**. They taught me that my feelings – whether lust, rage, or deep sorrow – were symptoms to be managed, not truths to honor.

Thus whenever desire appears, I suspect myself: *Is this real or a sign of sickness?* I no longer trust even my cravings to be mine.

Nowhere is this trial by desire more agonizing than in the realm of sexuality and affection. The sexual assault I survived, and the institution's aftermath, twisted the natural flow of that part of me. A warm spark of attraction now quickly tangles with dread. If I feel erotic desire, I immediately question: *Am I broken for feeling this?* Faces from the past – predators masked as healers – rise in memory to scold or smirk. The doctrine of the ward pathologized any hint of Eros; they would attribute a blush or a flirtation to my "condition." So I internalized their verdict. I learned to fear that my desires might be fundamentally tainted. When my body responds to a gentle flirtation or a romantic scene in a film, a wave of grief and confusion follows. I am aroused and appalled at once – aroused because I am human; appalled because I've been taught to equate that arousal with my own damage. It is a cruel double bind: I am *lonely* for connection, yet convinced that longing for it marks me as deviant or unwell.

This inner trial extends beyond the sexual into every domain of hope. If I desire justice – to see those who hurt me held accountable – a voice chides that I'm being "bitter" or "paranoid," that forgiveness is the proper path for the healed. If I desire recognition – to have my story believed – I'm told I'm "attention-seeking," that a good patient moves on quietly. Even the desire to simply be happy is suspect: *Don't get too excited, I hear, people like you can flip from euphoria to disaster.* It's as if the diagnosis I carry has become an eternal cross-examination of my character. **Anger becomes instability. Sadness becomes depression. Fear becomes paranoia.** Every emotion is

reinterpreted through the lens of pathology. In this way, the **label outlives the ward**, echoing in my head whenever I deviate from perfect neutrality. I find myself presenting evidence of sanity to an imaginary court: *See, I am calm, I take my meds, I smile appropriately, I do not yearn too loudly.* I play both defendant and defense attorney, trying to prove that my every desire is modest, rational, harmless – hoping to avoid the ultimate judgment: that I am **unfit to be free**.

But part of me rebels in the courtroom. There is a witness for the defense who clears her throat – a younger self, perhaps, or simply the voice of truth – and she testifies quietly: *My desires are not crimes.* Wanting to be touched, loved, heard, or vindicated – these are **not sins, but signs of life**. The prosecution (the internalized catechism of suppression) objects vehemently, of course. Yet with each proceeding, I sense the balance shifting. The more I recognize the absurdity of putting natural human longing on trial, the more this inner court loses its authority. I start to question the legitimacy of the judges – those faceless therapists and staff voices that still pronounce verdicts in my mind. *Who granted them such power over me, even now?* I recall how, under their care, I had no real advocate. Now, I can be my own. In a bold move, I imagine **dismissing the charges**. Desire approaches the bench – trembling, yes, but defiant – and instead of pleading guilty, it asserts its humanity. *I want, it says, and I will not apologize.* These words feel both dangerous and liberating echoing inside me. The trial is far from over, but a **seed of doubt** in the prosecution's case is planted. Perhaps the fault was never in the existence of my desire, but in the cruelty of a world that demanded my desire justify itself. Perhaps longing, in all its unruly forms, is my birthright, not a betrayal of recovery.

This thought alone is enough to send the judges of old into silence – if only for a moment. And in that quiet, I feel the beginnings of an acquittal.

Penance Protocol

Every system of control has its rituals of atonement. In the ward, **penance was protocol**: compliance earned pardon, resistance earned punishment. If I dared to break a rule – speaking too loudly of my pain, refusing a dose of medication, even shedding tears at the wrong time – there was always a consequence. Sometimes it was tangible: solitary hours in a padded room, an icy injection that turned my limbs to lead. Other times it was subtle: the disappointed shake of a doctor's head, the notation of “non-compliant” in my chart (a modern scarlet letter). I learned to atone swiftly for any transgression of their unwritten scripture. A forced apology to staff for “raising my voice” when I was actually pleading for dignity; a quick consent to treatment after an initial hesitation, to prove I had returned to the fold. These were my acts of contrition. **Forgiveness, such as it was, came in the form of momentary lenience** – a shorter leash rather than a true loosening of bonds. The message was clear: only through **utter submission** could I be cleansed of the sin of self-assertion.

Now, outside those walls, I find that I have internalized this *penance protocol*. When I catch myself feeling something I “shouldn’t” – anger, longing, pride – I immediately seek a way to **punish or purify** myself. It might be as minor as denying myself a nice meal or forcing myself to endure loneliness because I “don’t deserve” comfort. Or it might be more pernicious: flirt with

happiness and I'll swiftly remind myself of all the reasons I haven't earned it, plunging back into gloom as if joy were a crime. Sometimes I even fantasize about returning to the strict regimen of the hospital when life feels chaotic – a disturbing nostalgia for structure at the expense of freedom. It's as though a part of me believes I *must* pay for every breath of freedom with a coin of suffering. **Healing was supposed to mean release**, but I am conditioned to view it as a transaction: trade your autonomy for safety, trade your desires for approval.

I catch glimpses of how this dynamic plays out in my relationships too. When someone shows me kindness or love, instead of accepting it freely, I immediately feel I owe them, or worse, that I will eventually be punished for taking it. The old cosmology of the ward lingers: every comfort will be balanced by an equal pain. If I have a good day laughing with a friend, by nightfall I'm anxious, bracing for some repercussion from the universe or the ghosts of the past. It's a twisted **spiritual accounting**, where I am forever in debt for the mere act of being alive and occasionally happy. This is the theology they planted in me: *suffer, and you might be spared worse*. In the institution's terms: *sedate, comply, repent your errant feelings, and maybe we won't tighten the restraints*. Now transposed to life outside: *self-deny, diminish yourself, repent your hopes, and maybe the world (or your own mind) won't hurt you again*. It's exhausting. It's a loop of self-negation masquerading as salvation.

Yet awareness dawns that these **debts are not real**. The idea that I must continually atone for my existence was the **big lie** that kept me meek. What if I challenge it? What if no divine ledger waits to tally my pleasures against my pains? The ward was not a

church, and my doctors were not gods – though they played those roles to keep us in line. Realizing this, I begin to poke holes in the protocol. I allow myself small indulgences without punishment: a sweet dessert savored without later self-reproach, a day of rest after nightmares kept me awake, granting my body kindness instead of scolding it for weakness. Each time I do this, it feels like **breaking a commandment** and waiting in fear for lightning to strike. But no lightning comes. The only thing that strikes is a slow, dawning sense of injustice – that I ever felt compelled to live this way at all.

In this tentative rebellion, I find the seedlings of true penance – not to the institution, but to **myself**. I owe myself penance for the years I was forced to betray my own flesh and soul. And this penance looks nothing like punishment; it looks like compassion. It is not a protocol of suffering, but a practice of reclaiming. If I have a relapse of self-loathing, I will atone by speaking gently to myself the next morning, as one would soothe a hurt child. If I fall into old patterns of submission, I will seek not an iron will to crush the feeling, but understanding for why I default there, and guidance to walk out again. In short, **my new penance is patience**, not pain. With each act of gentleness, I confront the false gods of the past – those wardens and doctrines that demanded my self-destruction – and I refuse their terms.

Unbinding the flesh, I am discovering, is an ongoing ceremony. Every day I loosen another thread of the straitjacket that was woven into me. Some threads are sticky with memory and fear; pulling them out can sting. But with each strand removed, I can breathe a bit easier, stand a bit taller. The **unbinding** is both metaphorical and literal: muscles unclench, breath deepens,

boundaries of my skin feel more like home than prison. This Part of my journey does not conclude with a triumphant emancipation – not yet. Rather, it closes with a solemn vow: *No more offering my body or spirit up for sacrifice on the altars of other people's power.* No more false penances. The **protocols of control** that once kept me alive have outlived their usefulness; I am learning to lay them down, one by one, like chains rusting and falling from a weary body. In their absence, what remains is uncertain and delicate – *me*, unbound and vulnerable. But in that vulnerability lies the possibility of true grace: the freedom to heal on my own terms, and the slow, sacramental return to wholeness that no institution could ever grant, only I can claim.

Part III — Apocrypha of Memory

Epiphany of the Forgotten

It begins with a single crack in the walls of forgetting. Light seeps through, carrying dust motes of long-buried memory. I blink, and something lost is illuminated: a face I haven't seen in years, a voice that once haunted my nightmares now whispering a name. This is the epiphany of the forgotten – a sudden knowing that shatters the sanctioned silence. In a life numbed by doctrine and sedation, such recollection is heresy – truth breaking into a sealed tomb.

They taught me to forget. Within sterile halls and narrow sermons, I was instructed that certain events never happened, that parts of me were unreal. The institution – whether hospital or church – demanded a doctrine of containment. Only sanctioned narratives were allowed; all else was “delusion,” “sin,” or “confabulation.” So I learned to archive my experiences in the apocrypha of my mind: hidden chapters removed from the official canon of my life. I became the curator of a secret library of self, guarding volumes of pain and desire that no one – not even I – was permitted to read.

Yet memories are insistent spirits. However deeply I entombed them, they waited, patient as seeds beneath the snow. And now one stirs. Maybe it was a scent on the breeze, or the melody of an old hymn drifting down a corridor, or a gentle touch that lingered – something small breached the seal. In a flash, a buried fragment surfaces. I see a younger version of myself, eyes wide with a truth I was told to deny. I hear a sob I choked back years ago resound like the tolling of a distant bell. The past isn’t gone; it was only hidden. The forgotten have been biding their time.

This revelation comes with both wonder and terror. Like an uninvited angel, it declares, “Remember,” and suddenly I am standing in a crosscurrent of time. The child I was stands beside the adult I became, who learned to feel nothing. For a moment, they truly see each other, and a truth sparks between them: what was lost has a voice again. I feel the foundations of my carefully constructed ignorance begin to shake. The sacred silence I maintained is shattered by this quiet return of the repressed. Once the forgotten speak, there is no turning back.

Hymn of Dissonance

As memories return, they bring discordant music. The false quiet of not-knowing yields to a hymn of dissonance – a sacred song of broken notes. Each recovered truth clashes with the dogma I lived by. The doctrines of containment insisted on harmony at all costs – a false harmony built on my silence. Now every resurging memory, every protest from within, adds a new dissonant chord. It is jarring, but in that discord I detect life and liberation.

I was taught to sing only praises that pleased my keepers – to repeat their verses until I believed nothing else. I mouthed those hymns of compliance with an empty heart. Beneath that monotone of obedience, my soul was secretly improvising its own melody of unrest. I realize now that quiet, irregular pulse was the first measure of my own song.

Dissonance is sacred defiance in a world that demanded unthinking agreement. Each contradiction I unearth between my body's truth and their teachings is like a note out of place – yet when I listen closely, these notes form a new harmony. The tremor in my voice when I speak an uncomfortable truth is a holy tremor. The racing of my heart when anger rises at old injustice is a drumbeat in this hymn. My confusion – that swirl of doubt and belief, fear and hope – is a polyphony of emotion that far outstrips the sterile psalms of denial I once recited.

There is pain in the dissonance. It is not easy to hold two clashing realities in one mind; at times it feels like my skull will split from the noise. But I realize this noise is sacred, not profane. It is the sound of a soul cracking its shell. It is an infant's cry piercing the

silence of a church – scandalizing the devout, yet heralding new life. My dissonance is a sacrament of honesty. To those who enforced the old harmony, my questions and protests mark me as a heretic, a disruptor of their peace. So be it. I lift my voice louder in this strange, off-key hymn, letting the notes clash. What was once noise is now music – the music of freedom in the making.

The Flesh Remembers

Beneath the clamor, another testament emerges – written not in words but in the language of the body. The flesh remembers what the mind was forced to forget. Long before I could name my nightmares or question the doctrine, my skin was keeping faith with the truth. Every scar, every ache, every shiver without cause was a verse in a secret scripture of the body – a heretical text preserving the story I wasn't allowed to tell.

I recall how my hands would tremble whenever I passed a certain door in the institution. I didn't know why – I had banished that memory to a locked vault in my mind. But my palms would sweat, my heart would stutter, as if my body recoiled at an unseen ghost. That ghost was real: the memory of what happened in that room – a truth denied yet inscribed in tense muscle and clenched jaw. Trauma is carved into flesh like stigmata – marks of unsanctioned martyrdom.

There is holiness in embodied memory, in how pleasure and pain both carry messages. For years I flinched from every compassionate touch, like a wounded animal, because my body remembered betrayal long after my mind forgot. There were moments when pain mingled with a dark comfort – hurt was

familiar, and my body had learned to accept suffering as normal. Doctrine taught me to see my flesh as something to discipline, distrust, even despise. Desire was sin; pain was punishment to be stoically ignored. But the flesh itself rebelled. In secret, it kept longing and fear alive. The warmth of a kind hand on mine would ignite both yearning and panic, a confusion no moral code could parse. Erotic, traumatic, sacred – in my body these threads are knotted together. What the doctrine called sinful, my body recognized as yearning for connection. What the institution labeled disorder, my flesh knew as an imprint of violated boundaries. Every quiver of desire or dread was a memory – a truth living in muscle and sinew.

Reclaiming these bodily truths is an act of devotion – the reclamation of a temple that was always mine. I run my fingers over a scar and acknowledge the story it tells without shame. I let myself feel the anger coiled in my gut and the grief lodged in my throat, and I do not dismiss them. The body does not lie as minds can. The flesh remembers honestly, even when we try to command it to forget. So I choose to listen. In the quiet of night, I place my palm over my heart and feel its steady testimony that I survived – that I am still here. This too is scripture – a living testament that challenges the false peace of oblivion.

Communion of the Flesh

As I learn to read the scripture of my body, I discover I am not alone. Others like me linger at the margins of old temples, comparing scars in whispers. Exiles from our own skins, we were taught to forsake the flesh for a “higher” ideal that never cared for us. Yet now we begin to reclaim what was taken. In secret

gatherings – a shared meal, a gentle embrace, a moment of silent understanding – we partake in a new sacrament: a communion of the flesh.

In this communion, there are no altars of stone, no chalices of gold. The altar is our own bodies, and we offer not ritual bread but the honesty of our wounds and desires. We learn that touch and hold can be holy acts. A hug between survivors can be as sacred as any liturgy – a wordless Eucharist where acceptance is bread and understanding is wine. In each other's eyes we see a reflection: the same buried sorrows and sparks of defiance. We witness one another, validating realities that authority tried to erase. Yes, that happened to you, we say without words, as trembling hands clasp. Yes, you feel this way, and it matters. In this sharing, the shame that cloaked our flesh like a shroud begins to lift.

I find communion within, a homecoming in my own skin. Estranged parts of me – mind from body, spirit from sense – begin to reunite. Every sensation I reclaim is like a prodigal son returning to the feast. When I first dance alone in my room, swaying without fear, it becomes a form of prayer. My feet on the floor, my hips remembering motion, my arms reaching upward – I feel I am both supplicant and deity, worshipper and temple at once. The doctrine would call this blasphemy – finding the sacred in flesh without a priest's intercession or a text's permission. But what is blasphemy to them feels like salvation to me. In these moments, I inhabit my body fully, without apology. I taste food and savor it without guilt. I sleep and dream, unchained by nightmares. I share laughter and tears with someone I trust, baptizing my raw wounds in unexpected joy.

This communion is not mere indulgence; it's about wholeness. Each time I honor my body's needs or memories, I perform a small rite of healing. In community or solitude, flesh that was a battlefield becomes common ground for truth and connection. The line between sacred and profane blurs: I see my flesh as part of my soul's story, not its adversary. By reclaiming my senses, I reclaim my identity. Piece by piece, what was shattered comes together – an unorthodox congregation of memory, emotion, and body. This is the communion of the forsaken becoming a communion of the empowered. Through it, I gather strength for what comes next.

Ritual of Defiance

Armed with memory and upheld by the fellowship of flesh and truth, I am ready for the final rite: the ritual of defiance. Every act of defiance now becomes a sacrament – each a deliberate inversion of the rituals that once kept me powerless. Where I was commanded to kneel, I stand tall. Where I was told to be silent, I speak – even if my voice trembles, it carries the force of prayer. Where I was instructed to surrender my will on the altar of obedience, I reclaim it piece by piece, like scattered relics restored to a desecrated shrine.

I begin with small rebellions. I speak a forbidden truth to someone who has earned the right to hear it, lighting a candle in the darkness. I look in the mirror and address myself with kindness instead of contempt – a quiet exorcism of the self-hatred I once harbored. These may not seem grand, but after all that came before, they are radical. Each is a ceremony of reclamation. I

imagine the old gods of silence and shame recoiling at every step I take beyond their dominion. Let them recoil.

Even if I never confront my oppressors face-to-face, I have already rebelled in the most important arena: within myself. I have torn the gag from the mouth of my soul. I have broken the cycle of internalized oppression that kept me compliant. The rituals I practice now are ones of liberation: I write my story in my own words; I weep when my heart is heavy and treat those tears as holy water rather than weakness; I rage when injustice surfaces and let that rage sanctify my resolve instead of frightening me back into submission.

Each day that I choose life on my own terms, I overturn the false altar within me. I light incense not to appease any higher authority but to cleanse the air of lingering guilt. I mark my skin with gentle touches – mere lotion, perhaps – as if drawing sigils to ward off the old lies of unworthiness. I step outside and let the sun fall on my face without dread – a benediction from a world I rejoin on my own terms. These are my rituals now.

The Apocrypha of Memory I carry is no longer hidden. I speak its verses aloud. What once was consigned to the margins of my life has become my central scripture. In it I find a gospel of resilience and self-authorship. In breaking away from those who sought to contain me, I have not plunged into chaos – I have discovered an unexpected order, the natural rhythm of a self set free.

Where there was once numbness, there is now feeling – raw and real. Where there was silence, there is now a voice – mine – chanting in its own key. And where there was submission, there

now stands a person rising in sovereign grace, defined not by what was done to me but by what I do next.

This is the final ritual: to live openly, to love what was once broken, to remember and still grow — an act of defiance against despair and a new faith in life itself. No longer hidden, no longer ashamed, my story is sacred — and it is mine to continue.

Part IV — Passion of the Heretic

Simulated Salvation

They have built a heaven out of anesthetics. In this dystopian temple of care, every promise of **healing** is laced with control. The hospital and the cathedral start to look the same in their power dynamics: each offers salvation conditional on obedience. I remember the gentle voice of a clinician telling me the medication would *save* me—relieve my pain, quiet my mind—yet the offer felt like a bargain with a false god. It was a **simulated salvation**, a soothing lie to keep me compliant. My hurt would be managed, yes, but nothing would be truly healed. In the guise of cure, they administered **containment**. Sedation came not as a last resort but as a sacrament: a holy liquid to baptize away inconvenient feelings. *Be still*, they said, *and you will be safe*. Be still and you will be saved. They did not use those exact words,

but the message was clear in every pat on the shoulder and every increase of the dose. Here, *healing* meant surrender.

In this world, even **redemption** has been weaponized. The language of therapy and faith is co-opted to serve authority. *Forgive and let go*, they urge the oppressed, long before any justice is done. *Accept the treatment; it's for your own good*, they insist, turning care into coercion. It reminds me how organized religion once promised paradise to the poor as long as they remained meek and long-suffering. Today's secular institutions have their own opiate of the masses: an endless stream of self-help mantras, wellness apps, and chemical balms to simulate peace while injustice continues untouched. The result is a pacified population, taught to seek solutions *within* (through self-improvement, meditation, medication) rather than questioning systemic evils. Our very coping mechanisms become cages. The **metaphysics of dystopia** work subtly: instead of outright force, a velvet-gloved authority creates a virtual reality of contentment. We are encouraged to visualize ourselves healed and whole, even as the real wounds fester unattended. **Suffering** is to be privatized and pacified, not catalyzed into rebellion.

I see now how easily **mercy** can be twisted into a muzzle. The promise of redemption—**“we can fix you, just trust us”**—is dangled like a carrot, taming the urge to revolt. In the mental ward that felt like a locked chapel, I encountered fellow souls numbed into quietude by the very drugs that were supposed to deliver them from despair. Each of us was a **heretic** of normalcy, broken in ways that threatened the social order. So they crafted a synthetic grace for us: a salvation that asks only for our silence in return. If you comply, you will be “saved” from your demons; if

you resist, you are beyond saving. Thus compliance becomes a test of faith. It's a cruel irony that in such places, *to heal* first means to break. They broke our will with soft words and strong pills. They offered a **heaven** without pain, but it was only a simulation—a dim, stupefied haze where no real life or freedom could thrive.

Yet even as I floated in that chemically induced calm, some part of me knew the truth. It whispered that **real salvation cannot be imposed**; it must be chosen and fought for. True healing might hurt; it might ignite chaos before it brings peace. The simulated salvation I was handed sought only to **extinguish** the fire in me. It made me a manageable object, not a whole person. And somewhere beneath the pharmaceutical fog, my buried self began to stir. This self murmured: *Wake up. This is not mercy; it's surrender.* The **heretic's spark**—that refusal to accept a false heaven—glowed faintly still, even under sedation. And as the haze occasionally thinned, I could see the bars of the gilded cage for what they were. In those moments of clarity, suffering ceased to be something only to escape; it became something to *witness*. The stage was set for pain to turn into defiance, but first I had to face an even harsher truth: the gentle simulation of safety would eventually give way to outright persecution of whatever innocence or dissent remained in me.

Inquisition of the Innocent

Beneath the smiling face of simulated salvation lies the iron grimace of **punishment**. When the lullabies of false comfort fail to quiet the soul's rebellion, the system shows its teeth. I learned

this the night I dared to question, when I refused my prescribed path to “wellness.” The mask of benevolence slipped, revealing an *inquisition* in progress. Every trauma I’d survived, every tremor in my voice, was now evidence against me. In the middle of a sterile room bright as judgement day, they pried into my psyche for **heresies**. *Why won’t you comply? Do you think you know better?* The very act of holding onto my truth painted me as defiant, irrational, even dangerous. In a world that prides itself on progress, I was experiencing a medieval fate: the **innocent** being tried for the crime of suffering.

This pattern is old as authority itself. History is replete with literal inquisitions where those pure of heart or **different in vision** were branded sinners and devils. The witches burned, the mystics broken on the rack, the philosophers forced to recant—the innocent have always been suspect in the eyes of power. I felt like one of them: a blasphemer not because I lied, but because I *told the truth* about my pain. In this **clinical inquisition**, my tears and tremors were interrogated. Each symptom was another charge in the indictment: emotional instability, uncooperative attitude, failure to show the expected gratitude for being “saved.” They did not need to call it sin; they had new words—*disorder*, *resistance*, *lack of insight*. But the **logic was the same**: I was wrong for suffering out loud. I was guilty for not healing on their terms.

What disturbed me most was the quiet **ecstasy of power** I glimpsed in my judges. The doctor who spoke of treatment now wielded coercion with a zeal almost religious. The orderly strapping me down had a fervor in his eyes not unlike a priest driving out a demon. It was as if my very refusal to be pacified

had aroused a **perverse passion** in them—a righteous justification to use force. Here was *erotic suffering* in its darkest form: not a consensual play of pain, but a system deriving satisfaction from **dominating the vulnerable**. In that moment I understood how cruelty can wear the costume of compassion. They genuinely believed they were rescuing me from myself, even as they ignored my pleas and tightened the restraints. I was an **innocent on the altar**, and my sacrifice was for the “greater good” of my own cure.

The parallels to spiritual abuse were unmistakable. I recalled how some religious institutions relish in penitence and mortification. There are churches where faithful flagellants whip their flesh to prove devotion, and inquisitors who gleefully purged sins with fire and torture. Now I saw a modern version: a psychiatric ward where dissent is the sin, and **compliance** the only virtue. *We hurt you for your sake*, they seem to say. *This will cleanse you*. I could almost hear an echo from Mother Teresa’s controversial reassurance that *pain and suffering are “but the kiss of Jesus”*. Such words, meant to sanctify suffering, can too easily become an excuse for those inflicting it. In that brightly lit room, I did not feel any divine kiss—only the cold touch of institutional **violence** justified as love.

It became painfully clear: in this world, **innocence itself is heresy**. Retaining any shred of purity, hope, or individual truth is a threat to the order. The one who refuses to become numb or silent will be *made* to submit. And if they cannot break your spirit gently, they will break your body instead. This is how faith is turned against the **flesh**. In the name of saving my soul or sanity, they were ready to punish my very incarnation, my physical being

that trembled and resisted. I thought of all the gentle souls crushed throughout history for not conforming. Each one, a canary in the dark mine of society, singing of truths that others fear. And each time, the response of the fearful is to silence the song by any means necessary.

As the sedatives burned in my veins that night, forcing me into submission, a new feeling began to take root beneath the terror. It was **anger**, yes, but more than that: it was an incendiary clarity. I saw that I was living a chapter from an ancient story. The *heretic* in the dungeon, the *dissident* in the asylum—the details change, the power play remains. And a line from an old proverb flashed in my mind: *“The child who is not embraced by the village will burn it down to feel its warmth.”* In that moment I was that child, held down instead of held, forsaken by the “village” that should have cared for me. A spark leapt within: if they were going to treat my need for love and truth as a crime, then let the **fire** start. I would rather *burn in my own truth* than live in the lie of their mercy. My suffering, I sensed, could become fuel. The stage of persecution was turning a page; the next act could be **revolt**. The passion of the heretic was about to ignite—an agony that would not only refuse to be defeated, but would set something ablaze.

Rapture and Ruin

In the darkest hour of torment, I discovered a dangerous escape hatch: **ecstasy**. As they tightened their grip, I felt part of me splitting off, reaching for something transcendent to survive the pain. This must be how martyrs in ages past could smile through flames, seeing visions of heaven. Under extreme duress, the

mind flirts with **rapture**—a flight out of the body to avoid the body's destruction. I remember a strange euphoria washing over me as the world started to blur. The hurt didn't vanish, but I felt myself *yielding* to it, almost courting it. It was a seduction of oblivion. *Let go*, a voice in me whispered, *and you'll feel no pain*. It sounded so sweet, this temptation to go where suffering becomes pleasure, where agony and bliss intertwine. Perhaps it was endorphins flooding my system, or the first caress of madness, but I nearly believed that if I surrendered completely, I'd be *lifted* out of this reality altogether. A part of me yearned for that ultimate **Rapture**: to be carried away from a world that had only brought me cruelty.

That yearning for transcendence through destruction is a **perverse comfort** the oppressed know well. How many of us, wounded and cornered, start to dream of apocalypses? I recall the raw period of my life when I fantasized not just about my own death, but about a world-ending inferno. When personal suffering felt unbearable, I imagined it justified if only it could burn the *cause* of suffering to ash. It was an intimate version of the doomsday rapture taught in certain sects: the promise that the faithful (or in my case, the righteously angry) would be delivered into glory while the **world of sinners falls to ruin**. I see now how that fantasy had enticed me: it offered a sense of cosmic justice, however twisted. If I could not be free in life, at least I could be *right* in destruction. But oh, what **ruin** comes of that mindset! It is a deadly alchemy, turning trauma into totalism. I almost became a zealot of annihilation, willing to sacrifice myself and everyone else for a clean slate.

It is here that **faith** turned against the body in the most intimate sense. I had begun to treat my own flesh as an obstacle to salvation. Pain had become proof of some pending redemption: if I hurt enough, maybe I'd earn deliverance. It's the logic that underpins both self-harm and martyrdom: believing that **suffering itself can purify or exalt us**. Indeed, some revered figures have framed suffering as holy—Mother Teresa once called pain “the kiss of Jesus,” a sign of closeness to God. Such theology can comfort the afflicted, but it also feeds directly into systems of control. I was ready to destroy my body, to ruin *everything*, for a taste of meaning, a sense of being *loved by the universe* at last. This was the ultimate inversion: the **eroticism of suffering**, planted in me by years of abuse and moralizing, had blossomed into a suicidal piety.

I think of those medieval ascetics who starved and whipped themselves, chasing divine union through self-destruction. I see now I had become one of them in spirit. My hunger strikes, my reckless courting of danger, were a form of **devotional act** to a god of despair. It felt almost *good* to hurt myself when I framed it as righteous protest or purification. Each time I refused food or inflicted some punishment on my flesh, I felt a grim victory. In a world so beyond my control, **my own body was the one thing I could sacrifice** to assert some moral narrative. But this is a false rapture, a treacherous high. The more I embraced ruin in the name of principle, the more distant I became from the very life I wanted to save. It's a tragic paradox: seeking salvation by means of destruction yields only more destruction. As my health failed and mind frayed, it became clear that I was not ascending to any heaven—I was spiraling into hell on the fuel of unchecked rage and sorrow.

Standing at that brink, I was haunted by a realization: *This is how systems win*. They drive the hurt into such despair that we either comply **completely** or destroy ourselves (and sometimes others) in our desperation. Either outcome maintains the unjust order: a compliance ensures quiet, and a self-immolation, though it might spark brief chaos, often serves as a cautionary tale to scare others back in line. I saw the **ruins** ahead—I saw *myself* as both the bomb and the target. If I continued feeding on wrath and martyrdom fantasies, I would only fulfill the design of my oppressors by eliminating the last rebel: me. In the myth of the Rapture, those “left behind” face only ruin; in my personal myth, if I vanished in a blaze of revenge or self-sacrifice, who would actually be saved? No one. Not me, not the world.

This cold clarity was a turning point. My **passion**—my suffering—needed a new direction. Rather than fueling annihilation, could it fuel transformation? The theologians of old spoke of Christ’s Passion leading to resurrection; perhaps the heretic’s passion could lead not to a rapturous exit from life, but to a radical *return* to life, a reclamation. I thought of a line by a trauma healer: *“The paradox of trauma is that it has both the power to destroy and the power to transform and resurrect.”* If my trauma had nearly destroyed me, it could also remake me. That idea felt like a slender bridge over the abyss. I realized I didn’t truly want the world to end—I wanted **my world** of lies and pain to end. And maybe there was another way to accomplish that, one that didn’t require total ruin.

In the ashes of my apocalyptic fervor, a different fire started to glow. Not the white-hot blaze of fury that consumes indiscriminately, but a slower, steadier flame of **refusal** to

disappear. If I could harness my suffering, not as a vehicle to escape reality, but as proof of reality—if I could **hold my pain to the light and say, “See, this is real, this happened, and it matters!”**—then perhaps that might ignite something beyond destruction. This was the seed of an uprising, first within myself. It was the heretical thought that my life had value, that my body deserved to live and to heal on *my own terms*, and that every scar told a story powerful enough to challenge the official gospels of the system. I had to turn away from false raptures and face the raw, broken, precious thing that is **real life**. In choosing not to ruin myself to spite the world, I began writing a new gospel—one inked in blood and hope, pressed on pages of flesh.

The Gospel of the Flesh

I have learned to trust the **body** in a way that orthodox faiths never taught. After coming so close to annihilation, there was a moment—I can only describe it as grace—when I placed my hand over my heart and felt it still beating. Thump, thump, thump. Each beat a gentle rebellion, a quiet gospel being preached from within. It was as if my flesh itself spoke to me: *I am here. I have carried you through every hell. Do not forsake me now.* In that moment I realized how much doctrine I had absorbed that cast the body as an enemy—an obstacle to purity, a vessel of sin or weakness. But lying on the cold floor of my despair, it was **my body that stayed loyal**. My lungs insisted on drawing breath; my heart kept pumping, refusing to stop. The **Gospel of the Flesh** is written in these stubborn rhythms. It's a story of endurance, of wisdom encoded in muscle and nerve, of truth that can be felt under the skin.

This represents a **theological inversion** in me. Where once I sought truth in lofty ideas and disembodied ideals, now I find it in the humblest of places: hunger pangs, tears, gooseflesh, the warmth of a human touch. These are scriptures older than any holy book. When every external authority proved false or cruel, my body remained a **prophet** of reality. It tells me when I'm unsafe (heartbeat racing, stomach in knots), and it tells me when something is genuine (tears of relief, a shiver of recognition). I had to reclaim my body as sacred territory—sovereign and good in its own right. This reclamation is an act of **revolt** in a culture that profits from our dissociation and self-loathing. Every time I listen to my body's pain instead of numbing it, I subvert those who would capitalize on my silence. Every time I celebrate a pleasure without shame, I defy those who preach salvation through denial.

There is a profound spirituality in this bodily reclamation. I think of **doubting Thomas**, the disciple who would not believe resurrection until he touched the wounds. In a way, I became both Thomas and Christ to myself: I have had to touch my own wounds, to place my fingers on the scars of my trauma, and in doing so, I *believed*—not in some orthodox tale of salvation, but in my own capacity to resurrect from suffering. My scars are the pages of my **gospel**. They testify to horrors, yes, but also to healing. Each healed wound on my skin or psyche is like a word of a new scripture: *Here was pain, and here pain was overcome*. Where the old religious teachings said the **flesh** is weak, I find that flesh endures and remembers. As one psychodramatist noted, *"The body remembers what the mind forgets,"* and in that memory is a guide. My body remembered love and safety from

years ago that my mind had let go; it remembered dignity. When I started listening, it taught me how to find these again.

Of course, embracing the gospel of the flesh is a heresy to many. It flies in the face of any system—religious, political, economic—that relies on us being disconnected from ourselves. A populace at home in their bodies is harder to manipulate with fear and shame. In my own case, as I grew more attuned to my body, I found a new **grounded strength**. I could no longer stomach the lies I was fed—literally, even my digestion changed when I stopped swallowing the metaphorical poison. I began to eat when I was hungry, sleep when exhausted, cry when sad, scream when enraged. Simple things, yet they added up to a revolution in me. I was *embodying* truth instead of escaping it. It felt like *coming home* after a lifetime of exile in my own skin.

From this embodied place, **faith is born of the body** instead of set against it. I developed a faith in life's tangible holiness: the grace of a steady breath, the miracle of wounds healing into scars, the divinity of *touch* that can soothe panic. This is a faith with no need for temples or intermediaries. It reveres the **immanent** rather than the distant. I realized that when I treat my body with reverence—feeding it when hungry, moving it to feel strong, calming it when it's afraid—I am performing a kind of prayer. It is gratitude in action, a thankfulness to the flesh that has carried my spirit so far. And in caring for my own body, I learned to see others' bodies as equally sacred. The empathy that grew was immense: every stranger's body carries hidden stories and pains like mine; how dare I judge or harm them? The old dogmas that justified cruelty or control over others started to crumble

completely. One cannot salute the **sanctity of flesh** and still endorse any ideology that brutalizes bodies.

Thus the **heretic's passion** shifted into a new gear: from self-destruction to self-compassion, from hatred of the world's evil to love for the world's vulnerable material reality. The flesh of the world—trees, animals, rivers, fellow humans—became precious where before I saw only corruption. Don't mistake me: I still see the corruption, the terrible cruelty rampant. But I no longer see *existence itself* as the problem, something to transcend or burn. No, the problem is the forces that estrange us from existence, from our bodies and each other. And the answer, whispered by every cell in my being, is to **reclaim our incarnation** fully. If earlier I thought I had to become pure spirit to be saved, now I understand salvation (if the word even fits) as becoming fully human, fully present. My body is not a hurdle on the way to spirit; it *is* the way. This realization is rebellion—and it is freedom.

I started sharing this embodied gospel in small ways, quietly at first. A comforting hand on a fellow patient's shoulder in the ward, to say "I feel it too." Saying no to a procedure that felt wrong. Removing myself from the company of those who touched me without respect. These were **sacramental acts** of a new faith. And though small, each act was a spark. I saw hope kindling in my own eyes in the mirror, and occasionally in others'. A nurse, disillusioned with the system, confided that seeing me advocate for my needs reminded her why she became a healer in the first place. A fellow survivor told me my frank talk about bodily trauma helped him make sense of his own nightmares. **There it was: uprising in miniature.** The truth of the flesh spreading, challenging the old order one mind at a time. The heretic in me

was no longer isolating in pain; he was preaching in the flesh, through the flesh, a message of defiant life. And this, I sensed, was how greater revolts begin—intimate and embodied, before they are loud and collective.

Eclipse of Faith

There comes a moment in every long night of the soul when the first light of dawn appears—but it is not the sun. It is an **eclipse**. The old light, the old faith that dominated the sky of our minds, grows dim as something new moves in front of it. In the world outside and the world within, I began to witness an eclipse of faith. The grand narrative that had demanded my allegiance—whether it was the medical model that pathologized my humanity, or the social myth that obedience brings reward—was **losing its credibility**. I was not alone in this realization. All around me, I noticed others stirring, blinking as if waking from a spell. We were, collectively, beginning to doubt the stories that had kept us compliant. The **sun of authority** was still there, but its glare was weakening, shadowed by the undeniable evidence of our experiences. We had suffered under its uncompromising shine, and now our suffering itself was moving to blot it out.

I must clarify: this was not a descent into nihilism. The eclipse of **false faith** made room for stars. In the twilight of that eclipse, points of light that had been invisible in the noonday propaganda started to glimmer. We saw each other's faces, really saw them, perhaps for the first time. In the full brightness of the old dogma, we had been blinded to anything outside its sanctioned radiance.

But in the half-light, our eyes adjusted. We saw compassion in each other's gaze, and outrage too—the human reactions long suppressed by the intensity of a single, blinding “truth.” Now, in the cool dark, we could finally say aloud what we had whispered in solitude: *This isn't right. We deserve better.*

Thus personal awakenings began linking into a **collective uprising**. It was subtle at first. A patient in group therapy daring to question the doctor's wisdom, and other patients nodding instead of scowling. A nurse choosing to report an abuse by a senior staff instead of covering it up. Outside the ward, I heard of protests in the streets, survivors of various traumas banding together to demand change in courts, in churches, in schools. It was as if a hundred suppressed stories were finally being told because one sacrificial act had inspired them. Indeed, often it is a single spark that lights the conflagration. I think of that Tunisian street vendor, Mohamed Bouazizi, whose **self-immolation** in protest against corruption catalyzed an entire revolution. One person's unbearable passion can ignite the world. The news of his sacrifice spread like wildfire, an example of how **suffering laid bare** can topple tyrants. In his case, the inferno was literal; in ours, it might be metaphorical—but the principle stands. When the pain of the oppressed is made unmistakably visible, it *eclipses* the authority of those in power. The official narrative can no longer outshine the bleeding truth.

I realized, with both sorrow and pride, that my journey had become part of something larger. My own willingness to suffer openly—my refusal to pretend all was well—was a kind of martyrdom that bore witness. I survived, thank God, but in a sense a part of me *did* die: the obedient part, the part that

believed the system unquestioningly. That self was burned away, and in its place stands someone new, someone outspoken. And people listen to the survivor who carries scars openly. There's a credibility to truth spoken from a wounded place. As Tertullian observed of the early Christian persecutions, "*the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the Church*" in killing the dissenters, the empire only made their message grow. Likewise, the more this system tried to break me and others, the more it **proved our point**. Their *cruelty merely proved our innocence*, and those who saw us suffer began to ask why, and then they began to join us. The eclipse was well underway; faith in the old order waned as a new faith waxed in the hearts of witnesses.

What is this new faith? It is not a dogma but a **conviction born of experience**: a belief that *those in power do not have to remain so*, that *the world can be made humane*. It is a faith in one another, in the solidarity of survivors and *heretics* of all stripes. In the shadowed light of the eclipse, we discovered we were not isolated anomalies; we were a multitude. Our private traumas shared a common source in systemic abuse. And if pain was the initial bond, hope became the ultimate one. The same passion that once nearly led me to self-destruction was now transmuting into resolve to *live and fight*. The **heretic's passion** — my passion — had become both a refusal and a resurrection. I refused to comply with injustice, refused to hate my own flesh, refused to bow to fear. And in that refusal was a resurrection of my authentic self, and the birth of something collective: call it a movement, call it a community, perhaps even call it love.

An eclipse is transient; it signals change, but after the eclipse either the old light returns or a new day begins. I sense we are on

the cusp of dawn. The **sparks of revolt** that suffering ignited are catching. What begins as defiance can become revolution when it finds its chorus. There is a low song rising now from all the once-silenced heretics, a chant that sounds like mourning and victory all at once. We mourn the lives lost to senseless cruelty, the years stolen by lies. We howl for the innocents crushed and the innocence in ourselves we'll never get back. But we also celebrate that we *see* clearly now. The eclipse of false faith gave us back the sight of our own stars. We navigate now by the lights of truth, bodily truth and lived truth, not by the harsh sun of imposed doctrine.

In the Passion of the Heretic, I finally understand the story of the crucifixion in a new way: the moment of greatest despair (*"My God, why have you forsaken me?"*) was also the moment something shifted in the cosmos. The temple veil tore, old certainties collapsed, and a centurion beside the cross saw what the powerful would not—*"Truly, this was an innocent man."* The death of one just person planted a seed that empires could not eradicate. So too, the **passion of countless heretics** and innocents in our time is tearing the veil of the modern temples of power. The ground is shaking with approaching change. Those who have suffered in darkness are stepping forward as witnesses, and their witness burns away the illusions that sustained our oppressors' authority.

I step forward with them, eyes stinging but open. The eclipse is ending; a new light gathers at the horizon, not the searing light of yesterday's dogma, but a gentler dawn we have never seen before. It is the light reflected in countless human eyes that dare to meet one another with understanding. We do not know what

this new day will bring, but we know the night is ending.

Suffering and sacrifice have summoned the morning. In the East, the sun is about to rise—changed, as we are changed. And if you listen closely, you can hear in the silence before the first bird sings: the collective inhale of a world that refused to die, a world preparing to **uprise** with the coming day.

Part V — The New Covenant

The Panopticon Burns

The horizon glows with an uncanny dawn: the Panopticon is **burning**. After generations under its cold, unblinking eye, we witness the collapse of the ultimate surveillance edifice. *The all-seeing tower, once a god of glass and circuitry, is now a pyre.* Its myriad cameras and screens flicker and die in the heat, one by one, like false stars extinguished by a rising sun. The air smells of ash and *electric ruin*. For so long, we lived as prisoners in open-air cells, every movement observed, every whisper recorded, our own thoughts policed by the mere possibility of being watched. Now the watchtower's gaze is *gone*, melted into a glare of its own demise.

As the Panopticon burns, its **shadow of control** shrivels; the countless invisible chains that kept our souls in check turn to smoke. Those who once huddled under surveillance's omnipresent halo step forward, blinking in the newfound light. The structure's steel bones groan and buckle, a final gasp of the

old order. With each crash of falling girders, we feel something heavy lift from us.

For some, the collapse brings memories of those who gave everything to light this flame. We remember the dissidents once labeled mad or criminal, whose acts of defiance weakened the tower's foundations. This victory is **hard-won**, paid for by suffering and courage in equal measure. The surveillance state did not fall gently; it was *torn down* by the collective will of the watched.

Even now, our hearts still race at shadows that resemble drones overhead; our minds still second-guess innocent desires, expecting judgment. Liberation from the Panopticon is both an outer and inner revolution. The tower is gone, but its ghost lingers in our minds. We know the work is not over – true freedom will mean exorcising that implanted watcher from within. But tonight, as sparks fly upward to meet the dawn, we allow ourselves a moment of **triumph**. The center of control is *ablaze*, and in its destruction something precious is born: the first taste of **privacy** and the first breath of trust in one another's unchained presence.

The walls that once kept us isolated are now rubble at our feet. We step across them and realize we are not alone – we never were. In the newfound open, we see each other fully for the first time, eyes meeting with quiet, tentative wonder. In the flicker of flames, strangers embrace as comrades. We share names we once dared not speak aloud, and stories we once kept hidden for fear they'd be used against us. Each story is a small act of healing, a spark joining the larger blaze of truth.

As the Panopticon burns, so do the lies of its inevitability and invincibility. We were told that this surveillance state was omniscient – eternal. But here it lies in cinders, proving that even the greatest prisons can fall. The so-called all-seeing eye has been **blinded** by the light of our rebellion. Its fall marks the creation of a new vision, no longer built on watching and fearing, but on presence and trust. We turn our backs on the dying embers of the tower, faces toward the coming day, knowing that what awaits will not be perfect or easy, but it will be *ours*. The first light of a free dawn finds us standing together, unhidden and unafraid.

Martyrs of the Flesh

They once called our bodies **deviant, diseased, impure**. To be different in flesh was to be condemned: by doctors with cold diagnoses, by preachers with scalding sermons. **Pathology** was their word for our pain. They tried to cut it out of us, as though exorcising demons. The asylum, the conversion chamber, the prison cell – these were their crucibles to burn away our uniqueness. But instead, it was we who burned in silence and shame. Our very bodies became martyrs under the holy lie that only the perfect, the pure, the compliant flesh deserved to live untormented.

Think of those shattered by that lie: the young soul who starved herself seeking to be “clean,” only to find an early grave; the lover beaten to death for daring to love someone forbidden by scripture; the patient strapped down and shocked until memory unraveled, all in the name of therapy. These are the **martyrs of**

the flesh – casualties of an endless inquisition against the body. We speak their names with reverence, turning eulogies into hymns. What was dismissed as weakness or perversion is now recognized as *sacrifice* forced upon them. They carried the weight of society's fear and hatred in their skin and bones. In death or in survival, their flesh bore witness to truths the world refused to see.

Now, in the aftermath of upheaval, we begin to **honor** what was reviled. The scars that crisscross our limbs and torsos – scars from self-inflicted wounds, from surgeries, from ropes and chains – now shine like stigmata of a new sainthood. Each mark is a testament, each wounded body a living *gospel* of what it means to endure and still rise. We approach these bodies as pilgrims approach sacred relics: with awe and contrition. How blind we were not to see holiness in the *broken* and the *different*.

We have retired words like “unclean” or “crazy” that once locked people in cages of stigma. In their place, a new language of reverence flowers. We say: **Blessed are the scar-bearers**, for through their scars we learned compassion. **Blessed are those once called mad**, for their visions pierced a reality too cruel to face. What therapists and priests dismissed as delusion or sin now reveals hard truths about a sick society that only the so-called “sick” could see. Their breakdowns and bodily rebellions were unwitting revolts against an unbearable world. We would not heed them then, but now we listen.

Our liberation is written in the **language of flesh**. Where once we craved immaculate perfection, we now exalt the *real*: the fat and the thin, the scarred and the tattooed, the disabled and the

transfigured – all the shapes of humanity that testify to struggle and survival. These bodies compose our new iconography. In their contours and textures reside maps of suffering **and** grace. A pair of arms crisscrossed with old self-harm scars, a face etched by years of grief – these are holy scriptures in our new canon, each revealing something raw and true about being human.

We kneel not before marble saints, but before living **survivors** standing in their truth. To touch the gnarled hand of someone once shunned is to feel *resurrection* in your palm – the pulse of a life that refused to surrender. In each survivor's heartbeat, we hear the drum that led us out of bondage. The martyrs of the flesh suffered so that future generations might walk free. Now we inscribe their stories in our memory, ensuring no one will ever again be told their body is a crime. In the new covenant of our shared humanity, every body is a sacred text, and every life that persists in its own skin is a revelation.

Deliverance from Virtue

Virtue was the mask our oppressors wore to sanctify our suffering. We were taught that to be *good* meant to obey without question, to sacrifice our desires on the altar of purity, to scrub away every honest flaw. The institutions – the churches, the schools, the courts of public opinion – held up a shining ideal and demanded we contort ourselves to fit it. We tried so hard to be worthy: to follow every rule, to swallow every doubt and inconvenient truth. We let their brand of “morality” sand down our edges until we were smooth, polite, quietly dying inside. For too

long, *virtue* was a leash on our necks, keeping us docile even as it choked the life from our spirits.

Awakening came when we realized this imposed virtue was itself a kind of **violence**. Beneath the smiles of the virtuous lurked cruelty: every pious sermon that shamed a young girl for her natural longings, every righteous law that condemned the marginalized in the name of “decency.” We saw that what passed for moral purity was often just the absence of empathy – a pristine white garment hiding bloodstains underneath. The very people who urged us to be virtuous often thrived on our self-denial. They needed us to remain dutiful and obedient so that their power stayed unchallenged.

So we sought **deliverance** from virtue. It felt like an exorcism – casting out the false spirit that had possessed our conscience. We rebelled: speaking forbidden truths, embracing guiltless pleasures, showing mercy where the “righteous” demanded punishment. Each act of defiance chipped away at virtue’s throne. We discovered real goodness had been hiding in the shadows, waiting for us to free it from dogma. What a paradox: we had to *sin* (in their eyes) in order to reclaim our **souls**. We had to stumble and err, to let our hearts lead where rules forbade, in order to find an honest morality.

Now, unshackled from the old purity codes, we breathe air untainted by incense and guilt. In this clarity, we redefine virtue on our own terms – perhaps to dispense with the word entirely. Instead of “virtue,” we choose **integrity, kindness, courage**. We cherish the *messiness* of being human. We trust a compassionate heart over a thousand commandments. Where

once we flagellated ourselves for minor sins, now we laugh and learn from imperfections. This is deliverance: no external authority holds the keys to our worth. We escaped the prison of enforced righteousness and found the world outside is not the depraved hell they warned of, but a landscape where **grace** flows freely.

Freed from hollow virtue, we did not descend into chaos; we rose into a tender order. Empathy thrives without dogma's shadow. Love counts more than piety, justice more than obedience. Moral absolutes painted in black-and-white have given way to living color – a spectrum of understanding that embraces complexity. This deliverance is liberation not from *goodness*, but from the brittle cage in which goodness was imprisoned. Having broken that cage, we watch its fragments dissolve like old paper in water. We step forward now, guided by the simple light of conscience unclouded by authoritarian virtue. In our hands, no stone of judgment remains – we have put them down, instead extending them to our neighbors. This is the promise of our new covenant: a **faith** that requires not perfection, but presence and sincere care for one another. In freeing ourselves from false virtue, we have unleashed a truer, gentler righteousness – one woven from humility and love.

Ascension of the Flesh

For ages, ascension meant *escape* – rising above the **flesh**, casting off the imperfect body to dwell in some untouchable light. We were taught to see the body as a burden, a hurdle to transcend. But in our journey through hell and back, we

discovered a radical reversal: true ascension is not leaving the body, but *fully entering* it. It is not a flight from earth to heaven, but a descent into the here and now so profound that heaven blooms under our feet. Instead of yearning to become disembodied saints, we choose to be fully **human** – and in doing so find ourselves closer to the divine than ever.

In this new paradigm, the flesh itself rises – not away from the world, but **within** it. Every sensory experience once deemed “base” becomes a sacrament when embraced with presence. The taste of bread on the tongue, once fraught with guilt, is now a holy communion with life. The warmth of a loving touch on our skin is a benediction. To dance with joy in a bruised, aging body is to offer the purest praise. We do not seek to escape suffering by denying the flesh; we **transmute** suffering by honoring the flesh. Our scars and aches, our passions and pleasures – these are the materials of our enlightenment, not obstacles to it. We climb no ladder to the clouds; we root ourselves in the soil of reality and find that our **souls** can soar from there.

This is ascension as *presence*. To be fully present in one’s skin, in time and space, among others, is a greater miracle than any levitation. It requires more courage to live one day completely awake in the body than to dream of floating above it. We embrace a spirituality that has dirt under its fingernails and starlight in its eyes at once. We remember the ancient truth that the **Word became flesh** – and now we let the flesh speak its own word of truth.

And so the flesh ascends, paradoxically, by kneeling into life. We bow into our bodies and lift them not upward but *inward*, toward

authenticity. This is an ascension without departure, a rising that leaves nothing behind – not our wounds, not our histories, not our humanity. In claiming the sanctity of embodiment, we find that we carry the **sky within us**. The boundary between sacred and profane dissolves: all is one continuum of being. Our freedom is not a weightless flight but a grounded transcendence – a life lived so deeply that it touches the core of existence. The flesh, once vilified, now **glows** with the light we used to seek beyond the stars. We have brought heaven down into our very cells. In staying, we have ascended.

Testament of the Reborn

We survivors, once labeled heretics and outcasts, now lift our voices to write a **new testament** – not of words alone but of living truth. This testament is inscribed in every act of compassion that survived cruelty, in every bond of solidarity formed in the dark. It is written in scars and songs, in the laughter that returned after tears. We, the once-forgotten, become the authors of a reimagined faith. No longer will our stories be silenced or our revelations dismissed. The institutional guardians of the old order wrote scriptures to glorify the powerful; **we** write to celebrate the power of the powerless who endured. In this scripture of the reborn, the first shall be last and the last first – for it is the humble, the broken, and the brave who truly understand holiness.

Our covenant is simple: **never again** shall we allow fear, shame, or oppression to be preached as virtue. Never again shall we mistake surveillance for safety, or pious cruelty for righteousness. We covenant to remember the martyrs of the flesh by *listening* to

those who suffer and believing them. We vow to tend the wounds of the world with gentle hands, rather than hide them or call them sins. We pledge to guard the freedom we have won – to keep the Panopticon's ashes cold, to shatter any new idols of control that rise. Our faith is in the **human divine**, the spark of goodness that lives even in shattered hearts and tired bodies. We trust in the wisdom of those deemed mad, the grace of those deemed unclean. We know now that **God** (by whatever name) dwells not in temples or thrones, but in the very act of *survival* and *kindness*.

This new testament is not a closed canon. It grows with each day we dare to live honestly. Every survivor's voice, once stifled, now adds a verse. Every time we hold one another in despair or dance in joy, a new psalm is composed. In each other's eyes we find revelation – resilience shining there. In our gatherings there is no hierarchy of salvation; **each of us is both student and scripture**. The wisdom once monopolized by prophets and scholars now germinates in every soul that has faced the darkness and chosen to return to the light.

At dawn, we stand amid quiet ruins and wild gardens, and we **begin anew**. We carry no tablets of stone, no commandments chiseled by oppressors. Our laws are written on our living hearts – ever-changing and compassionate. We walk forward into an uncertain morning armed with nothing but love, and for the first time, that is enough. The sky stretches above us, vast and blue, a reminder that even after the longest night, light returns. We survivors are the testament of that truth. Our existence is the **gospel of the reborn** – a proclamation that from unspeakable suffering, life rises again, more courageous and sacred than before. In this dawning age, we are all authors and apostles to

each other. Together, hand in hand, we compose a story of defiant grace that even the darkest empire could not extinguish. This is our new covenant – forged in fire and pain, but now offered freely to the children of a new dawn.